DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 285 715 RC 016 370

AUTHOR	Howard, Gary; Neal, Colleen
TITLE	The Mexican American/Chicano Experience...A Special Report. Project R.E.A.C.H. Ethnic Perspectives Series.
INSTITUTION	Arlington School District No. 16, WA.
SPONS AGENCY	Western Washington Univ., Bellingham.
PUB DATE	81
NOTE	41p.; For a related document, see RC 016 369.
AVAILABLE FROM	Arlington School District, The REACH Center, 600 East 1st, Arlington, WA 98223 ($4.00 each or $2.00 each, when part of classroom adoption).
PUB TYPE	Guides - Classroom Use - Guides (For Teachers) (052)
EDRS PRICE	MF01 Plus Postage. PC Not Available from EDRS.
DESCRIPTORS	Cultural Background; *Cultural Differences; Culture Conflict; *Hispanic American Culture; *International Relations; Land Settlement; *Mexican Americans; Mexicans; Migrant Problems; Migrant Workers; *Modern History; *North American History; Racial Attitudes; Racial Discrimination; Racial Relations; Secondary Education
IDENTIFIERS	Chicano Movement; Chicanos

ABSTRACT

Events in American history are looked at through the eyes of Mexican Americans. Chapter 1 covers the American Indian (primarily Aztec) and Spanish background of the Mexican people, and the problems between the white settlers and liberal Mexicans living in Texas that eventually gave rise to the Mexican American War of 1846. Chapter 2 discusses the aftermath of the war and the treatment of the new Mexican American citizens who lost their land and ranches, and the Mexican migrant workers problems in recent years. Chapter 3 examines what the Mexican Americans have done to help fight prejudice and poor treatment, the Chicano Movement and the contributions of Chicanos to United States culture. Each chapter includes study questions, and a 9-item bibliography is appended. (JMM)

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The Mexican American/Chicano Experience

....a special report

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The Mexican American/ Chicano Experience

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Arlington, Washington

The Ethnic Perspectives Series was developed as part of Project REACH, under ESEA Title IV-C funding in the Arlington School District, Arlington, Washington. Additional support was provided through the Teacher Corps project at Western Washington University. Orders for Project REACH materials should be addressed to:

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Preface

America is the home of many cultures and races of people. Because of this, the story of our country's past and present can be told from many different points of view. This booklet looks at American history through the eyes of one cultural group, the Mexican Americans. As you read, ask yourself how the Mexican American point of view might be the same or different from other cultural groups in our country.

Acknowledgments

This booklet is a product of the work and cooperation of many individuals. Special appreciation is extended to Richard Post, Superintendent of the Arlington School District, without whose support the project could never have been initiated. Dr. Herbert Hite, Director of the Teacher Corps Program at Western Washington University, provided support in the revision and printing of these booklets. Herbert Hower, Principal of the Arlington Middle School, was a strong supporter of the project in its developmental stage. Special thanks go to Linda Kavaney, Maryanne Larsen, Don Garrow, and Debbie Hodgson, and their students who were the first to try these materials in the classroom. Invaluable assistance was provided by Karen Aurand, Project REACH secretary, who typed and helped edit the many revisions of these booklets.

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A New People/A New Nation

The Mexican American people have a history that is different from any other group in America. They are a people who have been formed by the combination of two different cultures and nations, one Indian and the other Spanish. Their Indian roots relate them to the oldest and most highly developed civilizations on the American continent. Their Spanish roots give them a close relationship with that ancient and rich culture of Europe.

On the Indian side of the Mexican American family tree, one of the strongest influences was the Aztecs. This native culture traces its roots in America back thousands of years. By the time the Spanish explorers first arrived in 1517, the Aztec culture had reached a level of development that equalled and surpassed that of Europe in many areas. They had built large, well-organized cities with pyramids, temples, libraries, schools, gardens, and even a zoo. They had a written language, a system of mathematics, scientific farming techniques, astronomy, and a method of irrigation that equalled any in the world. Their poetry and literature were highly developed and they had constructed theaters where plays were presented.

The Spaniards were very impressed with the wealth and beauty of the Aztec capital city of Tenochtitlán, which was built in the same

place where Mexico City stands today. Cortez, the leader of the Spanish exploration, was welcomed by the Aztec leader, Montezuma II. The "strange men riding in white winged ships" were treated as returning gods by the Aztecs, who lavished them with gifts and much gold. To the Aztecs, gold was a thing of beauty, and they used it to create magnificent works of art. For Cortez and the Spaniards, gold was a sign of wealth and power. Because he wanted to expand the empire of his homeland, Cortez decided he must defeat the Aztecs and take their gold and land for Spain. After two years of prolonged warfare, the Spaniards finally managed to destroy one of the most highly developed civilizations in the world at that time.

The Spanish visitors to America were different from other Europeans who much later settled on the east coast of the continent. The Spaniards did not intend to become permanent settlers. Unlike the English, who came as whole families, including wives, husbands, and children, most of the Spanish ships carried only men. Those Spaniards who did settle in America took Indian wives, and thus their children became mestizo, or a mixture of Spanish and Indian blood. This mixing of two nations and two cultures was to lead to the creation of a new cultural group, the Mexicans. About 150 years after the conquest of the Aztecs the people of mixed blood, or mestizos, outnumbered those of either pure Indian or pure Spanish descent. Some Blacks also were involved in the creation

of the Mexican people, since members of an African group called "Moors" had been in Spain for a long time. Also, during another period in Mexico's history, large numbers of African slaves were brought in to provide a cheap source of labor. Thus, the people of Mexico became a mixture of Spanish, Indian, and some Black blood.

With the defeat of the Aztecs, Mayas, and other Indian groups, Mexico became a colony of Spain called New Spain. A new culture was created which combined different elements of the Indian and Spanish ways of life. The Spaniards introduced the Spanish language, which became the national language of Mexico. However, many names and terms from the Indian languages were still used, so even in speaking there was a mixture of the two cultures. The Indians had several highly developed religions, but with Spanish control, the dominant religion became Roman Catholicism. But Catholicism, too, took on a unique Mexican form when many of the Indian beliefs and practices were kept alive and combined with it. For example, in 1530 Juan Diego saw a vision of a young woman who called herself the Holy Mary of Guadalupe. He took her appearance to be that of an Aztec goddess whose shrine had existed in the same place. From this vision came the patron saint of Mexico, the Virgin of Guadalupe, whose features were very Indian in appearance. Thus, the Mexican people took the Catholic religion of the Spaniards and molded it to fit in with their Indian heritage. This sharing and combining of two cultures is one example of acculturation. Each group of

people took on some of the culture of the other, without totally giving up its own way of life.

In search of gold at first, the people of Mexico began to move north into lands that were later to become Texas, New Mexico, Colorado, Arizona, and California. In fact, the Mexican people had established exploration routes all the way to Canada. At the site of present day Santa Fe, they set up the first non-Indian town in what was later to become the U.S. By the time any other European groups reached the West, the Mexicans had already established missions, military forts, towns, farms, huge ranches and mines. Since the Spaniards were the first to bring horses and cattle to America, the Mexican people developed the tradition of the vaquero, or cowboy, who was later to have a great influence on life in the West.

Up until 1821, Mexico remained a colony of Spain. As early as 1810, the Mexican people had grown tired of having their lives controlled by a monarch thousands of miles away across the Atlantic Ocean. Much as the English colonies had done in 1776, the Mexican people rose up in revolt. Their struggle continued for many years until they finally won their independence from Spain in 1821. Their victory created a new and independent nation of Mexico whose lands included much of what is today the Southwest of the United States.

Fighting For The Land

With the winning of independence from Spain in 1821, the Mexican government opened up the vast area of northern Mexico to settlement by Mexican as well as non-Mexican people. We will refer to these non-Mexican settlers as "Anglos" since that is the term often used by Mexican Americans today when they speak of Americans who are not of Mexican background. By 1832 over 20,000 Anglos had come to settle in northern Mexico. In exchange for their land grant, the Anglo settlers had to promise to become Mexican citizens, follow Mexican laws and respect the national Catholic religion of Mexico. In the early years of Anglo settlement in this region, relationships were peaceful and there was plenty of land for everyone.

As the Anglo population increased, however, more tensions developed. In Texas, where there were 30,000 Anglo settlers by 1836, these tensions first reached a violent pitch. Violating the agreement signed in their land grant, the Anglos began to disregard Mexican laws and customs. Some brought in Black people as slaves to do their work, even though slavery was against Mexican law. They openly criticized the Catholic religion and began their own Protestant churches. They misunderstood the Mexican culture and claimed it was inferior to the Anglo way of life. For example, Mexicans placed a high value on enjoying life and not working so hard that you forgot to have a good time. The Anglos, who thought that the way to heaven was through hard work, said that the Mexicans were lazy. Also, Anglos began taking over lands that were not given to them in the land grants.

When Santa Anna became president of Mexico in 1832, he tried to stop these Anglo violations of the land grant agreements. He demanded that Anglos living on Mexican soil must respect the Catholic church, follow Mexican laws, and pay the taxes they had been refusing to pay. These Anglos, as well as many Mexican liberals living in Texas, were angered by Santa Anna's attempt to place more restrictions on their way of life. Because of pressure from Santa Anna, the Texas Anglos, along with many Mexicans living in Texas, rose up in revolt and claimed the independence of The Lone Star Republic. Santa Anna defeated the Texans in an early battle at the Alamo. The Texans later took control of the war when they captured Santa Anna and forced him to sign a treaty proclaiming the independence of Texas. However, the Mexican government refused legally to recognize the treaty because of the circumstances under which it was signed.

Tensions between Anglos and Mexicans became even greater when the United States Congress voted to make Texas part of their territory in 1845. The U.S. wanted to control all the lands north of the Rio Grande River, and from the Atlantic to the Pacific Ocean. Even though they had no necessary right to this land, their domination of it fit in with the Anglo notion of Manifest Destiny. Manifest Destiny was basically an ethnocentric idea which stated that Anglo Americans were superior to other groups and deserved to control the land. The U.S. takeover of Texas angered the Mexican government. They viewed the movement of U.S. troops into Texas as an invasion of Mexican

territory and fought to defend their homeland in what became known as the Mexican American War of 1846. U.S. troops quickly defeated the Mexicans, who were unprepared for war. Through the take-over of Texas and the Treaty of Guadalupe Hidalgo, which ended the war in 1848, the Mexican government eventually lost over half of its original territory, including most of the present-day states of Texas, Colorado, New Mexico, Arizona, Nevada, Utah, Wyoming, and California. In exchange for this vast area of land, the Mexicans received 15 million dollars and a promise that the Mexican people living in the area would be guaranteed their homes and land and all the rights and protection of U.S. citizens.

Even though the Mexican American War is sometimes spoken of as a great American victory, many Mexican people even today view it as an illegal invasion and takeover of their traditional homeland. Over 75,000 Mexican citizens were living in this region during the war. Mexican people had settled in the area and developed towns, ranches, churches, and a complex society before any Anglos had arrived. For many people of Mexican descent today, this region of the Southwest is still considered to be part of Mexico.

At the time of the Mexican American War, many Anglo Americans understood what was happening and strongly opposed this violation of Mexican national sovereignty. In 1847, for example, the Massachusetts state legislature passed a bill calling the war "unconstitutional

and unjust." Also, Abraham Lincoln, who was then a U.S. Congressman, introduced several resolutions in Congress against the Mexican American War. Some historians have stated that the takeover of Texas and the resulting war were part of an effort to expand the territory available for slavery. This idea fits in with a statement made by President Ulysses S. Grant in his Personal Memoirs:

> The occupation, separation and annexation of Texas were, from the inception (beginning) of the movement to its final consummation (ending), a conspiracy to acquire territory out of which slave states might be formed.

Chapter 1 Study Questions

Please answer these questions on a separate sheet of paper.

1. Describe why people of Mexican descent are called a mestizo people.

2. Give at least two examples of how acculturation took place in the creation of the Mexican culture.

3. Give at least three examples of things the Mexican people had done to settle the Southwest before the arrival of white settlers from the east.

4. Give at least three examples of how the Anglo settlers in the Southwest violated their land grant agreements with Mexico.

5. What reasons do you think the U.S. would give for entering into the war with Mexico in 1846? What was the Mexican point of view?

6. Why might many people of Mexican heritage today still believe that the Southwestern states are part of Mexico?

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Tension With The Anglos

Native Mexicans living in what had been northern Mexico became residents of the United States overnight with the signing of the Treaty of Guadalupe Hidalgo which ended the Mexican American War. Even though they had been promised "liberty and property" and all the rights of U.S. citizenship in the treaty, it was not long before many native Mexicans in the new Southwest were reduced to second-class citizens. They were often treated as a defeated people. Their ancestors had been the original non-Indian settlers in the area. Some Mexican families had established roots for many generations in this land that was now part of the U.S. But this rich history seemed to have little effect on non-Mexican settlers who poured into the area after the Mexican American War and soon dominated Texas and California.

One of the forces bringing vast numbers of Anglos into the Southwest at this time was the Gold Rush of 1849. Actually, many gold strikes had taken place in central and northern Mexico before 1849. For Mexicans, the California Gold Rush was just one of a series and they were well prepared for it. Because of their past experience, the Mexican people had developed techniques for mining gold, which many of the Anglo miners had to learn from them before they could start their own mines. In spite of their knowledge and original

discovery of gold, however, the Mexican American miners were soon driven out of the gold fields. They were forced to leave as a result of violence and a new law passed in 1850 called the Foreign Miners' Tax Law. This new law led to the Mexican American miners being treated as "foreigners" and denied them and their property any kind of legal protection. This was a direct violation of the Treaty of Guadalupe Hidalgo, which had guaranteed Mexican Americans "all the rights of citizenship." With this law to back them up, many non-Mexican miners swept down on the Mexican mines. They burned the buildings to the ground and shot, lynched, or ran off all but a handful of the Mexican American miners.

Much of the traditional land owned by Mexicans in the Southwest was also lost during this period of history. Under Mexican laws there had been a very loose and unclear definition of the legal boundaries of each owner's property. Most of the boundaries were based on tradition and common understanding, which the Mexican people honored and took very seriously. Also, the original land grants often included huge amounts of land, so large that many areas lay vacant and unused.

When Anglo settlers moved into the Southwest they considered these vast unused areas to be available for their use. Their ideal was to divide the land into smaller parcels, each one supporting an individual family farm. The Anglos did not understand or agree with the ideal of the Mexican ranchero having huge areas of open land available for

grazing cattle. Thus, a conflict was created when the Anglo settlers moved in and took over areas which had been the traditional home of Mexican American families.

Because of the unclear definition of traditional boundaries, it was often impossible for Mexican Americans to prove their ownership in court. Things were made more difficult with the passage of the Congressional Land Act of 1851. This law required U.S.-recognized proof of ownership, and thus opened the door for Anglos to take over more of the homeland of Mexican families in the Southwest. In this way, many well-established Mexican American families became homeless and poor in the last half of the 19th century. This land take-over can be seen as another example of ethnocentrism. In this case, Anglos assumed they were superior to Mexican Americans and that they had a right to move in and take control of traditional Mexican land.

Needed But Not Wanted

During the first half of the 20th century, Mexican Americans, as well as residents of Mexico, provided the backbone of American labor in the Southwest. The large scale farming of vegetables, fruits, cotton, and sugar beets, as well as mining, industry, and railroads depended heavily on the muscle of the Mexican American people. For the most part, American business took advantage of these people by providing extremely low wages and poor working conditions in exchange for their valuable service.

The first large scale movement of Mexican citizens into the U.S. for jobs came in the early years of the 20th century. Mining and farming were expanding rapidly in the Southwest and Mexican people were recruited as a large source of cheap labor. Also, Mexico was experiencing a violent revolution in 1910, and many Mexican people wanted to come north in search of peace and a better life. Many of these people decided to settle in the U.S. and others maintained their homes in Mexico. Movement across the border at this time was open and free, so Mexican people could go back and forth as much as they wanted.

By 1924, however, the Border Patrol had been organized and immigration from Mexico to the U.S. became more difficult. The fruit, cotton and sugar beet growers and other U.S. businesses still wanted cheap labor, so they did everything they could to encourage Mexican workers to come into the country. A new industry grew up run by professionals called "Coyotes," who were experts at smuggling workers across the border. These Coyotes often received payments from U.S. businesses for their services. Once the Mexican workers arrived in the U.S., they worked long hours at low wages, and lived in labor camps where the conditions were often unhealthy and crowded.

Those who provided labor in the fields were known as migrant workers, since they had to travel, or migrate, from one area to another following the seasons and the harvesting of the crops. The life of the migrant worker families was difficult and presented many problems.

Usually all members of the family had to work in the fields to get enough money to survive. Children would often work rather than go to school. Those who tried to attend school would often get discouraged because of the constant need to move and change schools. Unhealthy conditions in many migrant labor camps led to increased death and disease for children and adults as well. The average life span of the migrant worker was 20 years less than that of the average Anglo American. The death rate among infants and children was twice that of other Americans. Since most of their work was seasonal, the winter time often brought poverty and near starvation. It was difficult for migrant laborers to organize for better working conditions, because the families were always moving from place to place. In general, the migrant laborers were caught in a "cycle of poverty" from which it was difficult to escape. The low wages paid to migrant workers and other Mexican immigrants, tended to hold down wages for all Mexican American workers. This sometimes created tensions between Mexican Americans who were U.S. citizens and those workers who were newly arrived from Mexico.

The Great Depression of the 1930's brought a new form of suffering for Mexican people. Because many Anglo workers had lost their better paying jobs, the competition for lower paying ones became greater. People were looking for any kind of work just to survive. During this time the U.S. government began deporting (removing from the country) many Mexican people. From 1930 to 1940, over a quarter of a million people of Mexican descent were forced out of the U.S.

and returned to Mexico. Most of these people were given no hearing or legal proceedings before they were shipped back across the border. Some historians claim that some of those deported were native born Americans and citizens of the U.S. Ten years earlier, many U.S. employers had been doing everything they could to bring Mexican workers into the country. During the Depression, however, it seemed the U.S. was doing everything it could to get rid of them.

World War II created another economic boom for the U.S. and a large work force was needed. Once again the U.S. looked to Mexico as a source of people to do hard work for low wages. This new recruitment of Mexican workers was called the Bracero Program. Bracero is a Spanish term which is similar in meaning to "strong arm." After kicking thousands of them out of the country in the 1930's, the U.S. in the 1940's again called upon the strong arms and backs of Mexican people to work in the farms and factories supporting the war effort. The Mexican people responded in great numbers and came to fill the available jobs.

After the war, the Bracero Program continued to allow a set number of legal workers to enter the country each year. Another system, called the Green Card Program, was set up to give short term visas to Mexicans doing temporary work in the U.S. Most "green carders" live in Mexico and return when their jobs are over. U.S. employers, however, wanted more cheap labor than either the Bracero or Green

Card programs would allow. Therefore, the smuggling of "undocumented workers" into the country increased in numbers. These people did not have the necessary legal papers to enter the U.S. Often these Mexican workers have been referred to as "wetbacks," which is a negative term and a stereotype describing the fact that some had to swim or wade across the Rio Grande River to get into the States.

By 1954 many U.S. government officials and Americans in general felt that too many "undocumented workers" had entered the country from Mexico. In that year they began "Operation Wetback," which was a massive effort organized to deport any person who looked like a Mexican and could not prove his U.S. citizenship. In the five years that this program operated, almost 4 million Mexican people were forced back across the border. It has been reported that many long-standing U.S. citizens of Mexican descent were harassed, mistreated, and sometimes deported by this program. "Operation Wetback" has been criticized as an act of racism, because it is claimed that any person who looked Mexican could be selected out as a target for humiliating treatment.

Many Mexican American citizens were actually in favor of limiting the illegal entrance of workers from Mexico, because these workers tended to lower the wages for all people of Mexican descent. Also, the negative stereotype of the "wetback" was often applied even to those Mexican American families who had lived in the Southwest since the 16th century. But it soon became clear that any person of

Mexican ancestry, regardless of whether or not he was a citizen of the U.S., could become a victim of Operation Wetback. The lesson of the Depression had repeated itself: When Mexican workers were not needed for cheap labor, they were not wanted in the country.

Chapter 2 Study Questions

Please answer these questions on a separate sheet of paper.

1. Describe why the Foreign Miners Tax Law was a violation of the Treaty of Guadalupe Hidalgo.

2. Describe how the Congressional Land Act of 1851 and other events led to the loss of much of the land traditionally held by Mexican American families in the Southwest.

3. Name at least three of the forces or events that caused Mexican people to continue to come across the border and seek homes or jobs in the U.S.

4. Give at least four reasons why life for the migrant workers was difficult.

5. Describe why Operation Wetback could be called an act of racism.

6. Why can it be said that Mexican American people were needed but not always wanted in the United States? Do you think this is still true today?

Chapter 3

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Strength In Unity

It must be pointed out that most Mexican American citizens by the end of World War II lived in cities and were not involved in the migrant work force. Many of these families had been citizens of the U.S. for several generations and had developed urban careers and family life. Because of discrimination from Anglos and because of their desire to support each other as a community, most urban Mexican Americans lived together in their own section of town. Mexican American neighborhoods, called barrios, acted as the center of life for most Mexican American people.

The residents of the barrios did not escape the prejudice and mistreatment received by their fellow Mexican Americans working the migrant routes. Some states had systems of segregation which did not allow Mexican Americans to use the same swimming pools, lunch counters, hotels, cafes, and drive-ins as Anglos. In some areas, movies, churches, schools, and even cemeteries were segregated. Among some members of the Anglo population there were strong negative stereotypes created about Mexican Americans. A stereotype is a false image which puts all members of a group in one box, usually a very unattractive box. The anti-Mexican feelings created by these stereotypes sometimes led to mistreatment and violence against Mexican American people.

In the middle of the 20th century violence against Mexican Americans broke out several times in different cities. One example was the "zoot suit riots" which took place in Los Angeles during the winter of 1942-43. The "zoot suit" was a very elaborate and colorful outfit worn by many young men in Mexican American neighborhoods during the 1940's. In the minds of many people at that time a "zoot suiter" was considered a juvenile delinquent or neighborhood "tough," something which was not always true. The zoot suit riots were so named because U.S. military men cruised through the barrio of East Los Angeles stopping to beat up and harass some of the Mexican Americans who happened to be wearing zoot suits. Even though the riots were sensationalized in the newspapers, the police did very little to step in and stop the beatings which took place several nights in a row. When they finally did take action, the police arrested the victims of the violence rather than those who caused it and made it illegal to wear a zoot suit. Even though many Mexican American people disapproved of zoot suiters in their own neighborhoods, they did feel that the police reaction to the riots was an example of racism. They wondered why such discrimination should continue at home when thousands of Mexican Americans were proving their loyalty to the country by fighting in World War II overseas.

The Mexican American people have never quietly accepted the discrimination and prejudice they have received for over 100 years in the U.S. One of the earliest organizations eager to voice Mexican

American concerns was the League of United Latin American Citizens (LULAC) started in 1927. The goal of LULAC was to help Mexican Americans who were assimilating to the dominant American culture. The idea behind assimilation was that if Mexican Americans looked and acted more like Anglos, perhaps they would be accepted and treated better. For this reason, LULAC encouraged its people to learn English and fit in with the customs and lifestyles of the U.S. Assimilation was one attempt to overcome the violence and discrimination Mexican Americans had suffered. The problem with assimilation as practiced in the U.S. was that it encouraged the new immigrant people to forget their old culture and try to become like everybody else. Assimilation was similar to the melting pot idea which said that all people should jump into the American melting pot and come out looking alike.

Another organization, started in 1927, had as its goal the improvement of the wages and working conditions for Mexican American laborers. This early labor organization was called the Confederación de Uniones Obreras Mexicanas (CUOM), or the Confederation of Mexican Labor Unions. CUOM was the first stable union of Mexican Americans and had over 3,000 members in 27 locals by the beginning of the 1930's. They held their first strike in 1928 which was broken up by the arrest and deportation (sending back to Mexico) of the union leaders. In 1933 CUOM led 7,000 workers off the fields of the Imperial Valley in California to strike for better pay.

The CUOM and other Mexican American unions were started because the large national labor organizations, such as the American Federation of Labor and the Congress of Industrial Organizations, neglected to stand up for the rights of non-Anglo workers. These early attempt to gain rights and better treatment for Mexican American workers had some success, but for the most part the employers were able to break the strikes by having the leaders arrested and sent back to Mexico. The owners could always use illegal means to smuggle in new Mexican workers to replace the strikers. In this way they were able to continue to exploit, or take advantage of, the cheap labor of Mexican American people.

After World War II things began to change. In spite of the poor treatment they had often received in this country, over 300,000 Mexican Americans fought for the U.S. in that war. They proved themselves to be brave and dedicated American soldiers, thus disproving many of the negative stereotypes which had existed. When these Mexican American soldiers returned to their families and neighborhoods after the war, they had gained the confidence and skills to improve conditions for their people. When they had proven themselves on the battlefield in service to their country, they could no longer accept being treated as second-class citizens.

Many of these returning soldiers and other Mexican American citizens worked together to create new organizations to help their people. For example, the Community Service Organization registered 40,000

new Mexican American voters in the barrios of California. This organization also fought to win better police protection in the barrios and to bring an end to poll taxes which kept poor people from registering to vote. In the 1960's MAPA (Mexican American Political Association) was started to get Mexican American people elected for government offices. Through the efforts of groups like these, Mexican Americans such as Edward Roybal of California and Henry Gonzales of Texas were elected to the U.S. Congress.

During the 1940's and 50's Mexican Americans also became active in working to win better education for their children. The schools had always had problems relating well to Mexican American children. For example:

1. Many teachers did not understand Mexican American culture.
2. Schools often did not allow Spanish to be spoken.
3. Spanish speaking children were often classified as retarded, even though they had average or above average intelligence.
4. Mexican American students were often segregated in lower quality schools.
5. Migrant children changed schools often, or had to work instead of go to school.

In the 1940's Mexican American groups won court cases against segregation of schools in California and Texas. Later, in the 1960's more militant methods were used to improve schools. Over 15,000

Mexican American students walked out of high schools in East Los Angeles. This student strike was called a "blow-out," and triggered similar walkouts all across the Southwest. At least one supportive teacher was fired and several students were arrested in these demonstrations. Through a sit-in at the Board of Education office in Los Angeles, the students were able to get their teacher back, and win several improvements including smaller classes, classes about their cultural heritage, and classes which taught practical job skills.

Another victory for Mexican American people in the schools came with the Bilingual Education legislation of the 1970's. According to these new laws, children who have a primary language different from English, have a right to receive instruction in their own language as well as in English. In this way, the children are encouraged to keep in touch with their own culture while they are learning to get along in the English speaking world.

There are still many problems faced by Mexican American students today. The average number of years of schooling achieved is 8.3 for Mexican Americans as compared to 11.3 for Anglos. Many Mexican American young people drop out of school before graduation. Hopefully, the Bilingual Education programs and the efforts of Mexican American groups will help improve this situation in the schools.

The Chicano Movement

Today there is a growing movement toward greater strength and pride among Mexican American people. A new burst of positive energy was created at La Raza Unida Conference (The United People) held in El Paso, Texas, in 1967. At this meeting many Mexican American people, including the poor and the young, came together to gain a sense of purpose, direction, and common cause for gaining their rights and preserving their culture. People attending this conference began to call themselves Chicano rather than Mexican American. The term was one they chose for themselves to provide a new image and to overcome the negative stereotypes of the past. The term "Chicano" is used by people who are proud of their Indian and Spanish heritage, and who have chosen to express their culture fully within the United States. They are not going back to Mexico, because they are legitimate citizens of the U.S. Neither are they trying to assimilate and become like other Americans, because their Chicano identity gives them a special and unique culture of their own. Chicano people also use the term "Raza" as a name for all people of mixed Spanish and Indian blood in both North and South America. La Raza means "the race" or "the people," and it is a term that refers to over 280 million people, the vast majority of the population living on the American continents.

The spirit of La Raza Unida Conference has done much to call attention to the need for equal protection and human rights for people of

Mexican descent. Emiliano Zapata, who was a popular champion of the poor people during the Mexican Revolution, is still held up today as a hero of the Chicano movement. Zapata fought for one of the great ideals of his heritage:

> The land belongs to everyone like the air, the water, the light, and the heat of the sun, and those who work the land with their own hands have a right to it.

The life of Zapata has inspired modern Chicano leaders who are trying to end the exploitation of Mexican American workers in the U.S. Cesar Chávez, for example, is a modern day Chicano leader who has attempted to live by the spirit of La Raza and Zapata. Chávez has had a long history of working to help the cause of migrant workers, but his greatest successes came after 1965. In that year, tighter control of the Mexican border made it less likely that Anglo growers could smuggle in illegal workers to use as strike breakers against the migrant unions. Chavez took advantage of this and organized the National Farm Workers Association (NFWA) in a massive strike against grape growers. The immediate purpose of the strike was to get decent wages and working conditions for grape pickers in the U.S. The broader purpose was to join all migrant workers and Chicano people in La Causa, or The Cause, for equal rights and fair treatment. The grape strike started slowly, but grew gradually until it engulfed the whole United States and parts of Europe in a large scale boycott of grapes. In the grape boycott, Chávez and his people encouraged all shoppers to refuse to buy grapes until the California growers met the union's demands. The boycott lasted five years and managed to

reduce the sale of table grapes by 15 percent. With their profits damaged, the growers finally agreed to sign a contract giving better wages and working conditions to the grape pickers.

The grape boycott and other work by Chávez and the United Farm Workers helped bring the concerns of Chicano people into public awareness. Millions of people, including Anglos, Blacks, and other ethnic groups, joined in supporting the boycott across the nation. This was an impressive show of support for the Chicano people and helped inspire victories in other areas. Even though less than 10 percent of Mexican American people are farm workers, the success of Chávez and his workers gave almost all Chicano people a new sense of hope for overcoming the problems of the past. Phrases like "Chicano Power" and "Bronze Is Beautiful" are replacing the old feelings of defeat and powerlessness. There are still many problems to overcome in education, housing, employment, and health care, but the Chicano people have developed a strong sense of common concern to help La Raza achieve a better way of life in the United States.

Chicano Contributions

It would be a mistake to assume that all Mexican American people are the same, for there is as much variety among them as among any other group of Americans. Some Chicano families were among the first non-Indian settlers in this country, whereas others have just recently arrived from Mexico. Although many Chicano families are stuck in the cycle of poverty created by discrimination and exploitation, others

are financially secure. Some Chicano people are actively involved in politics and programs to help La Raza, others are not. Some work the migrant labor routes, but most are holding down jobs in the cities. Whereas Spanish is the native language of Chicano people, it is not spoken at all in many Mexican American homes today where the children have not learned the traditional tongue. U.S. citizens of Mexican descent are also very different in the terms they choose to identify themselves. Today more and more are choosing the term "Chicano," because it speaks of pride in their cultural roots. Others would rather be called "Mexican American," because it means they are U.S. citizens and also Mexican by blood. Still others use "Spanish," "Hispanic," "Spanish American," "Latino," or "Mexicano." Each of these words may have a special meaning for the person who chooses to use it.

The Mexican American people have given much to all Americans. Their ancestors established the earliest non-Indian towns, trade routes, mines, and ranches in land that later became the United States. The costume and lifestyle of the American cowboy was a gift of the Mexican people. Words like "lasso," "chaps," "corral," and "rodeo" are still colorful reminders of this Hispanic experience. The Mexican Americans' ancestors gave us the horse and planted the first wheat, lemons, figs, oranges, dates, and olives on the American continent. Traditional Chicano food like tacos, enchiladas, chili, and tortillas are now enjoyed by Americans of all cultural backgrounds. Mexican American

workers, although they were usually mistreated and poorly paid, have provided the backbone of American labor in the fields, mines, railroads, and factories of many parts of our country.

Individual Mexican American people have achieved greatness in all areas of life. We have already discussed the bravery and dedication of men like Emiliano Zapata and Cesar Chávez. Chicano people have also made significant contributions in the arts and literature. Luiz Valdez created El Teatro Campesino (The Farm Workers Theater) to help dramatize the concerns of his people during the grape boycott. Since then, his drama troupe has traveled to all parts of the U.S. They present original plays written, directed, and acted out by Chicanos. One of the greatest of modern Chicano writers is Richard Vasquez, who has been successful in producing novels as well as plays for the screen and stage. In the entertainment field, the names of Trini Lopez, Vikki Carr, Joan Baez, and Anthony Quinn represent the many Chicanos who have won greatness by entertaining millions of people around the world.

In the field of sports, Richard "Pancho" Gonzales has been called one of the greatest tennis players of the 20th century. Jim Plunkett is a Chicano quarterback who won the Heisman Trophy in college, was named NFL Rookie of the Year in 1971, and won the Most Valuable Player award in leading the Oakland Raiders to their victory in Superbowl XV. Champion golfer Lee Trevino made golfing history when he became one of the few people ever to win both the U.S. Open and the

British Open in the same year. Another talented young Chicana golfer is Nancy Lopez, who finished second in the U.S. Open when she was only 18 years old. Still on her way to greatness, she won the national college title in 1976.

Chicano people have also added much to our country through their music, dance, and traditional holiday celebrations. One example is the Cinco de Mayo (5th of May) celebration which is held each year in Mexican American communities. On this day the Chicano people remember the great victory won over French troops by the Mexican peasants on May 5, 1862. Cinco de Mayo is a celebration of the Chicano people's strength in resisting tyranny and control by the wealthy and powerful. In this way, the holiday is similar to the meaning of the 4th of July celebration in the U.S.

Today Chicano people are the second largest non-Anglo ethnic group in the United States. About 85 percent of all Mexican American people live in cities, mostly in the Southwest, with other large populations in Oregon, Washington, and some midwestern states. The accomplishments and rich cultural traditions of these people have added a special element to the overall culture of the United States.

Chapter 3 Study Questions

Please answer these questions on a separate sheet of paper.

1. Why do you think urban Mexican Americans tended to group together in the same section of town? (Give at least two reasons.)

2. Why do you think the police arrested the Mexican Americans who got beat up rather than the servicemen who started the fighting in the zoot suit riots of 1942-43?

3. Give three examples of how Mexican American people organized to fight against discrimination in the 20th century.

4. Why do you think so many Mexican American young people participated in the student "blow-outs" in Los Angeles and other cities of the Southwest during the 1960's?

5. Describe why many Mexican American people today choose to call themselves "Chicano." Why is Emiliano Zapata one of their heroes?

6. How has the work of Cesar Chávez been an inspiration to all Chicano people?

7. Give at least three examples of contributions made by the Chicano people to the overall quality of life in the United States.

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